

Affirmation:
United Methodists
for Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and
Transgendered
Concerns

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Transgendered Concerns
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General Conference Summary

The UMC's General Conference [GC] reaffirmed its stand against same-gender Holy Unions, the ordination of Gay clergy, and homosexuality. The delegates voted 646-294 to prohibit same-gender Holy Unions, 645-306 to forbid Gay ordination, and 628-337 to keep the statement "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings." All these votes were basically a 2 to 1 margin.

Heated debates and protests took place throughout the ten-day gathering in Cleveland from May 2-12. In one powerful instance, a Silent Witness portraying over 20 silhouettes, each attached with the name of an LGBT person, explained how they were murdered.

Another demonstration which took place outside the Convention Center was supported by *Soulforce*. One hundred ninety-one arrests took place during this demonstration! *Soulforce* is an interfaith association working through peaceful protest for "all who suffer injustice, especially sexual minorities," according to their mission statement. Among those arrested were Bishop C. Joseph Sprague of Northern Illinois, *Soulforce* founder Rev. Mel White, Arun Gandhi, grandson of India's independence leader, and UM ministers Jimmy Creech, Gregory Dell, and Don Fado [who all put their ministries in jeopardy by breaking church law for performing same-gender Holy Unions].

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Editorial Outline

General Conference 2000 [GC] is over! The Conference gave many messages to it's LGBT members and we came away with many strong feelings. Many of us left GC in despair, anger, tears, and pain. While many seasoned Affirmation members did not expect great changes at this Conference, many were shocked by the overwhelmingly negative outcome of the votes. The hundreds of new volunteers experiencing GC for the first time, wondered, "What's next for us?".

I recalled my first GC and how different it turned out to be from the preconceived notion I had as a first-timer. I didn't expect that GC would be so political. It seemed very far from the church I knew and participated in regularly. There seemed to be little or no compassion toward God's people; rather it seemed to be a showcase for the church's bureaucratic system. Having lived through past hurtful GC's, I found a safe haven in my local church - the church where I grew up. This was the place I went to heal after GC. A place where I was fully accepted as a LGBT person. Time, and my local church were key to my healing after GC.

This edition of the newsletter was intentionally delayed because we felt time was needed for healing in order to gain

better insight after GC. The focus for this newsletter then, is on our faith, strength of spirit, and healing. Contributing to this newsletter are:

Steven Webster, one of Affirmation's founding members, who gives his powerful witness to his *SoulForce* experience in "*Our Arrest in Cleveland*". Longtime Affirmation member and former spokesperson, **Randy Miller**, gives his witness in "*The Uninvited Guest: A View From the Floor*".

Affirmation's Convenor, **Judy WestLee**, shares her feelings in "*Just blow your socks off!*". Judy's story, as well as **Roberta High's** contribution, "*Die-hard Methodist*" pay homage to those who would advocate staying in the UMC.

"*Foundation*" by **Kathryn Mitchem** shares Affirmation's strengths from previous GC's as well as the one just past in Cleveland.

While "*Blessed Are Those Who Trust in the Lord*" by **Chip Aldridge** focuses on a more spiritual perspective, his article, as well as **Ms. Puntavista's** "*Go Therefore and Get Elected!*", also give their views on the possible path that Affirmation should now take. ▽

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Affirmation

Mission Statement

Affirmation is an activist caucus of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered people organized to speak for ourselves. Together we:

proclaim a gospel of respect, love and justice;

relentlessly pursue policies and processes that support full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people in all areas and levels of The United Methodist Church;

overcome the barriers that diminish our common humanity by excluding or judging people because of their race, gender, class or physical abilities;

empower people to undertake works of inclusion and justice where they are.

Affirmation Newsletter

is a quarterly publication.

The official views of Affirmation are stated by the Co-Spokespersons. Opinions offered in signed columns, letters and articles are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Affirmation.

To save space in this newsletter:
United Methodist Church = UMC
United Methodist = UM
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered = LGBT

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Information

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Summary

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Another protest took place inside the Convention Center. Around 100 people walked throughout the balcony wearing stoles belonging to persons who were refused ordination because they proclaim themselves to be LGBT. This protest was staged to remind the delegates of exactly *who* their vote was affecting.

After the first vote, protests began with individuals standing in the aisles on the main floor of the GC. A recess was called and a compromise reached whereby the protestors were allowed to remain in front of the platform area, even allowing them to break for lunch.

The protest intensified during the vote on Holy Unions, when the demonstrators moved to the platform area. The protestors stated that the church had broken covenant with them, and all LGBT people. Another recess was called during which the Cleveland Police entered the Convention Center and arrested 29 people. In a move of solidarity, two bishops [Susan Morrison of Northern New York and Joseph Sprague of Northern Illinois] joined the protestors in being arrested. "I awakened this morning asking myself, where would Jesus be today," said Sprague. "I asked myself, where would Gandhi be today? Where would King be today?"

The 27 demonstrators and two Bishops in solidarity were each charged with disrupting a lawful meeting and each was forced to pay a \$160.00 fine or be faced with incarceration.

Delegates gave heated debated about the subject of homosexuality. Dr. Traci West, an African American delegate from New York: "The Word of God says, 'Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She is to keep silent.' The Word of God says, 'Slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling in singleness of heart as you obey Christ.' The Word of God repeatedly says that women must be submissive. Every woman here, if she were to obey the true teachings of the Word of God, would be silent. Every Black person, every African here, if they were to obey the true teachings of God about obeying our masters, would be on our knees to our White brothers and sisters and saying, 'Massa, I obey you as I would obey Christ.' I say to you, Church, this is our opportunity not to use the Bible one more time as a club to beat up our brothers and sisters. Admit we are divided on this issue, seize this opportunity to step into the grace of God and embrace the love of Jesus Christ for all of us. Is there not enough hate, enough war in your countries, is there not enough prejudice, is there not enough use of the Bible to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation? Let us say not to the world 'and worry about the newspapers,' but worry about the outcasts. Worry about the one that Jesus calls us to worry about: the oppressed. I ask you, church, seize this moment and oppose this main motion, vote no."

▽

Our Arrest in Cleveland

There were four of us from the Madison, Wisconsin area who were arrested with Mel White and nearly 200 others on May 10th outside the Cleveland Convention Center where the UM-General Conference was meeting. George and Brian, Jim and I, besides traveling from South Central Wisconsin, also shared in common the fact that we have been together as committed couples for the past twenty years. We could no longer sit back while our denomination debated whether we were blessable or not. We knew that God had blessed us no matter what the General Conference [GC] might decide, and we took seriously the baptismal vow that calls us to accept the freedom and power God gives each of us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they may present themselves.

We were trained in the spirit and principles of non-violence and *Soulforce* by Gandhi's grandson, Arun, and Martin L. King's daughter, Yolanda and veterans of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s who served not only as our teachers, but as Mel White's teachers as well. While there can be no doubt that Mel White has a powerful ego, I was impressed more than once by Mel's willingness to be taught by others of more experience in the ways of Gandhi, King, and Jesus. The whole event, from the training through the arrest, jailing and court appearance was an intensely spiritual event that I felt tremendously privileged to share with my life partner, Jim. No church ceremony could possibly compare with it.

When the morning of May 10th came, we gathered peacefully outside of the convention center.

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SoulForce Arrest

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We heard supportive speeches, some from UM Bishops. Among the first arrested with us was Bishop Joseph Sprague, Arun Gandhi, Yolanda King and M. L. King's mentor in non-violence, the Rev. James Lawson. In groups of ten, we symbolically blocked a driveway at the convention center, declaring "no exit without justice". We did not want the delegates to leave the Conference without giving God's LGBT children justice. We were arrested with heads held high. Both protestors and police treated each other with courtesy and dignity.

While The Christian Century and other commentators have ridiculed the Cleveland action as media-driven street theater, the arrest was a very real experience. Jim and I were part of a group of ten who, because of jail overflow, were driven some distance in a police van to another district jail. This was a very real jail - there was garbage on the floor, the smell was overpowering. We surrendered all our possessions, our belts, shoe laces and eye glasses. We were placed in cells and told [incorrectly] that we would spend the night in that place where there was not a moment's silence for the constant noise and shouts of regular prisoners. We feared being identified as Gay in this place, but a few of us did establish rapport with the other prisoners, and seemed to earn their respect for our stand - especially when one of us identified himself as a white pastor who had stood with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Montgomery bus boycott. Being very extremely near-sighted, I saw nothing [including the food we were given to eat] until our property [and my glasses] were returned 10 hours after our arrest, and after our appearance before a friendly and courteous judge. This judge was nothing but a voice out of the blur in the front of the room to me. He heard our guilty pleas and wished us good luck as he released us to pay our fines.

It was only a little over a year before Cleveland that Jim had a heart attack and by-pass surgery. It has been a difficult year of recovery and sometimes during that year Jim was depressed, as is common with recovery from heart surgery. There were moments in that year when Jim wondered out loud why he had not been allowed to die--that he should have died. It was during the *Soulforce* event in Cleveland that I heard Jim say that maybe this was one of the reasons God wanted him to live--that there was important work for him to accomplish yet.

Was it worthwhile? We believe, with *Soulforce*, that the UMC, together with other mainline denominations, does great harm to all God's LGBT children when they continue to proclaim the misinformation that we are sick or sinful. This can no longer be just an internal matter to be dealt with in the UMC, but it is a matter of concern for all LGBT persons. We believe this misguided message has a negative impact on the struggle for civil rights of all LGBT persons in this country. We especially believe that this misinformation harms many young LGBT persons growing up in this homophobic culture. Not only should this misinformation stop, but the UMC should itself be a force against the evil, injustice, and oppression that is homophobia.

Steven E. Webster

AMAR

AMAR was a coalition of Affirmation, Methodist Federation for Social Action, and the Reconciling Congregation Program that came together in the months leading up to General Conference [GC]. AMAR made a powerful witness in Cleveland as we sought to embody a fully inclusive church. Two of the coalition member-groups, Affirmation and the Reconciling Congregation Program each have a long history of working for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the UMC. A third coalition member, the Methodist Federation for Social Action has a broader justice agenda but is united with the other groups in working against heterosexism in the UMC. In recent months these groups were joined by the newly formed network, United Methodists of Color for a Fully Inclusive Church, an exciting new initiative that reminds us that all forms of oppression are ultimately related and that we must work together for their elimination. Finally, In All Things Charity, a network of clergy and laity formed in response to the restrictive actions of 1996 GC related to sexual orientation, worked closely with the AMAR coalition.

Given the actions of GC 2000, members of the AMAR coalition are feeling bruised and saddened. Having made every effort to compassionately reach out to delegates - through prayer, fasting, worship, story-telling, information-sharing and ultimately through civil disobedience - members of AMAR are grieving over the hard-heartedness of the UMC. Each member-group of the coalition, and individuals within each group, are reflecting on how best to continue our witness to call the church to account as its actions continue to wound and exclude precious children of God.

Our commitment to continue to work for a fully inclusive church is firm. Likewise, there is little doubt that our groups will continue to find ways to enhance our witness through working together. The AMAR Coalition itself, however, was formed specifically to prepare for and to witness at GC 2000 in Cleveland. The AMAR Coalition may be reconstituted in a similar or expanded form once the member-groups have charted their course for the time ahead. But for now, the AMAR Coalition in the form it took at GC is no more.

The acronym "AMAR" was chosen because these letters form the Spanish word "to love". In this sense the spirit of AMAR, the love that was extended through our joint witness at GC, continues. We give God thanks for one another and the ways in which we were able to witness together at GC 2000. And we are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we move into the future.

Kathryn Johnson

The Uninvited Guest: A view from the Floor

I have it on good authority from old-timers that Affirmation has, from its inception, struggled with the tension between engaging and disrupting the General Conference [GC] process. As a *new* old-timer, I must admit that I have often been torn between the two strategies. At the 1992 GC, I participated in an action of civil disobedience which effectively disrupted the GC proceedings by continually raising a large banner that read: *The Stones Will Cry Out!*

In 1996, I was officially invited to provide a witness about the importance of supporting Gay and Lesbian civil rights. I will never forget that following that presentation, the presiding Bishop came down the line of invited witnesses and shook everyone's hand until he came to me and then deliberately walked by me. What a sad metaphor for the Church! As an African American, my personal and family history is replete with stories of being treated as a second-class citizen, but I learned a little more about the nature of our oppression as LGBT people of faith. Sometimes, even when we are officially invited to the table, we remain uninvited guests.

As in previous years, the 2000 GC revived the healthy tension between engagement and disruption as strategic options. The AMAR Coalition, particularly *In All Things Charity*, invested an enormous amount of energy in an excellent effort that provided delegate-tracking, identification, and persuasion before and during the conference. This was a very critical effort because it provided important insider information about individual delegates and in some case whole delegations. If there was any flaw in this effort [and I am not sure there was], it was a failure to properly take into account how easily the process of holy conferencing can be subverted.

Many of the folks described over the years as "the loving middle" were for that very reason not elected as delegates this time around. Other delegates were elected specifically to send a message about normalcy rather than to vote their consciences. Yet would be a tragic mistake to describe the engagement of the political process as a failure or wasted effort.

As a veteran of many General Conferences, I have rarely seen such large numbers of LGBT delegates coming-out in an effort to move the Church. Nor have I witnessed so personally the enormous effort of friends and allies to seek justice within the process. As a fundamental matter of faith, I do not believe that such gifts are ever wasted. They are part of the groundwork that is needed to move forward during other times. Because of the intransigence of the GC, there came a time when some of us within the AMAR Coalition felt that another kind of witness was needed -- a witness that would disrupt rather than engage the GC.

With the support of the entire coalition, a plan was developed in order to facilitate this witness to happen. This strategic nature of the action is important to note because some have argued that the act of civil disobedience was simply the result of anger or frustration on the part of the protesters or was fundamentally unchristian. While many of us no doubt will continue to be legitimately angry and frustrated with a church whose official policies treat us as uninvited guests, the strategic goals of our act of civil disobedience were grounded in a truth of the gospel.

We are not second-class citizens in God's reign and will no longer stand in either obedience or silence while others bear false witness against us.

However it might have appeared, the act of civil disobedience was carefully scripted -- practice of speaking truth to power. In my mind, the intended audience for our action was not simply the GC.

Instead, it was an attempt to send a message to those folks in the larger world who would not only hear that the UMC had reaffirmed its heterosexist positions but also that a group of committed people of faith stood in opposition to these unjust policies. Civil disobedience stands in a long tradition of Christian protest reaching from the life of Jesus to the struggle against Apartheid. The action that took place at GC was undertaken deliberately to disrupt business as usual in the UMC, and to dramatize the deep divisions within our Church.

As the memory of another GC fades, I believe that our struggle for liberation and full inclusion will be immeasurably strengthened to the extent that we continue to speak truth to power, and are willing to take up the pain and power of being the uninvited guest.

Randy Miller

Just blows your socks off!

Acts 8:26-40

Well, OK I think I have just about gone the entire route now. I've been surprised by the pain I felt when hateful things were shouted at me for over two hours straight. When we stood outside the Cleveland Convention Center a week and a half ago, Fred Phelps and family was there. I really should send him a thank you note. He did more good for advocating my point of view than I have ever done! I felt that pain of being ridiculed.

I cried my tears. I felt compassion--watching people I love cry. My partner, Janet, was still crying a week later. I stood on that same mall a few hours after Fred Phelps and family left with Rev. Greg Marlan whispering so as not to disturb a Communion Service. There stood the three of us - my pastor, Greg, Janet and myself in a circle. All of us with tears flowing down our cheeks. Then the three of us just naturally bowed our heads in prayer, arms around each other, heads touching, still crying.

I have cried. I have been angry. I went through my stage of "that's it! I'm out of here! I'm done with the United Methodist Church!" I've felt that these past few days. And I could do that. Except I know there will be more people who will come to know themselves as LGBT who will be in this denomination and other denominations -- and they will be no further along than where I left them. And I can not abandon them!

Why do I feel so strongly that Christ's church is to be open to all people? Another quick story from Cleveland: Janet and I were standing by the entrance of the Convention Center holding plywood silhouettes of victims of Gay hate crimes. Each silhouette had the story of murder attached to it. A woman from the Good News caucus walked over, read the story, looked at us and said: "You Gays should read our Bible!"

Now I didn't mind at all being referred to as "you Gays" because I had looked around and "we Gays" were by far more attractive than our conservative members! We didn't have that hard look to us. And this morning I want to answer that woman: "WE GAYS HAVE READ THE BIBLE! WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO LIKEWISE!"

From Acts 8:26-40: Philip, a believer in the risen Jesus and an evangelizer, is led by the Holy Spirit to go to a deserted road in the heat of the day [it was noon] -- reminds me of Cleveland -- and there encounters a believer of Yahweh reading Scripture aloud. But who is that believer? An Ethiopian! Probably a man of dark skin. Shocking. And - worse than that - an eunuch! This just can't be! Hasn't Luke, the writer of Acts, read Deuteronomy 23:1 where it clearly says eunuchs should be excluded from the assembly of the LORD [Yahweh]? This is clearly "against Scripture"!

"We Gays" have read the Bible! And we read Luke saying the Holy Spirit is the primary catalyst in the extension of the Gospel into the world 2000 years ago and today!

"We Gays" have read the Bible and we read Jesus remains at work in His Spirit, motivating His messengers and extending the frontiers of the Kingdom - even beyond the boundaries of societal norms!

"We Gays" have read and experienced how the Gospel breaks thru geographical and ethnic barriers.

"We Gays" have read the Bible. And we read 1 John declare: If you cannot love your brother and sister who you have seen, you cannot love God who you have not seen!

"We Gays" have read the Bible. And we read in the Gospel according to John that the church is a living thing -like a grapevine. And we will be known by our fruit. And the branches, which do not bear good fruit, will be cut off and cast away.

"We Gays" have read the Bible. And we believe in God, in the risen Jesus who is the Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

And it's time we said so. It's time that we said the Bible is more than rules to keep Gays out of the church. The Bible is about bringing people INTO the church!

We have work to do. We have justice to accomplish. We have mercy to practice. It's past time that we put an end to this wrangling about who can be at the table and in the family. We ARE at the table. We ARE part of the family. Now let's get on with doing the family business--practicing justice and doing mercy.

"We Gays" have read the Bible! It's time that we not "leave" the church. It's time that we reclaim the church! It's time "We Gays" lead a revival in the church! Let's bring the church back to what the Bible really says: That we have a loving, creating God who never stops wooing God's people back to God. That we have a loving, creating God who always loves us -no matter how big our warts are!

"We Gays" have read the Bible! It's time we explain what's written there to the rest of the church!

Judy WestLee

Die-hard Methodist

I am distressed at the thought of people even considering leaving the UMC because of the decisions made at General Conference. Yes, it was a great disappointment to many. If we are truly Methodist, believe in the teachings of our founder John Wesley and more importantly the teachings of Jesus, then how can we entertain such thoughts.

Wesley had many crucial periods in his life as he struggled and rediscovered his understanding of faith and salvation. He was a controversial figure, slandered and attacked. From the beginning the attacks came from both inside and outside of the movement. Through all his controversies he was not without support. We are not without support in our struggle--growth and change move slowly.

I believe in the Jesus' teachings and continued presence with us in our trials and struggles. I believe in the connectional system of the UMC. We are UNITED METHODIST and we WILL find ways to continue together as UM Christians seeking the guidance of Christ.

Roberta High

Roberta High comes from a long line of male Methodist clergy on both sides of her family. Her daughter, the Rev. Betty McXon, is the first female clergy in the family, and she serves Rockford Centennial UMC in Rockford, IL. To put it bluntly, Ms. High is from a die-hard Methodist family. To her, "leaving the Methodist Church would be like leaving my family and never seeing them again." Roberta is 81 years young and lives in Chicago.

are that the opposite actually happened. For some of us who have been working on the issue since 1972, there has never been as strong a showing of solidarity and support as there was this year. These observations are based on the following:

- the actual number of delegates who stood with us in solidarity and support each time there was an opportunity to do so;
- the number of Bishops who showed visible signs of support, both by their actions and speech;
- the extent and nature of support received by coalition members handing out the daily newsletters;
- the reaction and response to each and every coalition activity and witness;
- the sheer number of volunteers working with the coalition [we estimated at least 600!];
- and this GC's much-improved media coverage.

It seems to some of us old-timers that the very same thing is happening over this issue, in the same way as happened over the issues of dissolving the Central Jurisdiction, and the broader national civil rights actions. And that is that. As the far-right gets more and more vicious and hostile and succeeds in winning the votes/numbers game for awhile [because they feel more and more threatened and afraid, and thus become more violent and irrational], those who had been silent or neutral begin showing support and solidarity in ever-increasing numbers. The actions of the far-right actually force the numbers of supporters both up and out! It doesn't mean the desired change is imminent or even guaranteed, but I think it does mean that, overall, things are moving steadily in the right direction. I'd be interested in what your assessment of the situation is -- both in terms of how you're personally feeling about all this, as well as a more objective observation, for instance, comparing this GC to the past previous three GC's.

Foundation

I strongly believe that our real bottom-line strength lies in Affirmation's diversity, and the sheer multiplicity of ways we are called to speak to the church at this time. Being the Community Organizer that I am [just one of the many hats I wear], immediately value the power and ultimate effectiveness of action on many fronts. I don't like using warfare imagery. The guerilla warfare model is what I refer to when I speak of a *witness on many fronts simultaneously*. That is what happens when each person and each collective discerns where we are called to be in the lengthy process of bringing the church to where it needs to be. At each critical juncture in history there have been people working hard on the issues from the inside, others working hard from the outside, and still others working hard from any other position possible. The strength to make the eventual change comes from the commitment of each person and collective to whatever position God calls them to. That position may change over time as some persons or collectives shift positions from inside, to outside, to the middle. It is not our job to convince others of the position they should take. Rather, the issue is to help each other discern what position God is calling us to at this particular time. I hope that we, as Affirmation, can celebrate the variety of callings among us. At the same time we should urge each member to seriously discern the position where their action is to be lived out! For some that will be from inside the church, for others that will be from outside.

Yes, GC was a sad time, generating much pain and anger. Those who witnessed the church's closedness for the first time are justifiably and understandably grieved -- some to the point of leaving the church. But there is another perspective. Some of us remember what it was like beginning with the 1972 General Conference [GC] -- to be one of only a small handful of people trying to address the issue. It is from that vantage point that I now speak, since I've been part of the steadily growing handful ever since [except for the one GC I missed in 1980].

Even though the technicality of the votes statistically widened the gap for the first time in years, my own feelings and observations

Kathryn Mitchem

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord...

They shall be like a tree planted by water...

In the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

-- *Jeremiah 17:7-9*

May 2000 was a season of drought in the legislative processes of the UMC. Inside the Cleveland Convention Center was a parched and desert place for advocates for LGBT persons and their loved ones in the UMC. Pharaoh and Pharisees controlled the policies that will oversee our lives and bend our backs for the next four years. Their hearts were hardened and the majority ruled - so the minority lost. But, our trust was in God. It is not General Conference [GC] where our souls are nurtured -- and our roots of faith are not planted in the shallow soil of the floor of the Cleveland Convention Center.

"Blessed are those who trust in the Lord". Central American liberation theologians teach us that God stands closest to us when we are most in need -- suffering as the people suffer. God was standing with us in Cleveland. Nearly 600 AMAR volunteers were a testimony to God's presence. The Spirit fed us daily under a cathedral sky at the communion services. The rich "Storehouse of God's Justice" was by Persons of Color for a Fully Inclusive Church. The cry of a crucified God spoke through Silent Witnesses who gave voice to those killed because of sexual orientation or gender identity. The hand of God held a rainbow ribbon which encircled the sandstone walls of the Convention Center. The assembly of the beloved community was present in that third of delegates who consistently voted on the side of God's grace. The Body of Christ stood before the delegates on that Thursday, May 11, as a visible testimony that the covenant had been broken by Pharaoh and Pharisee.

After GC, people kept checking in with me - "How are you? Are you OK?" Since I participated in the action on May 11th that ended with 27 "friends of AMAR" and two Bishops being arrested, most people assume we had a traumatic experience. When we "disrupted a lawful meeting" that day - we could not predict exactly what would happen moment-to-moment. But, I have NEVER felt more totally surrounded in prayer. I found myself in Psalm 91:4, "God will cover you with feathers, and under God's wings you will find refuge."

I did not go to Cleveland to disrupt the business of the GC. If decisions were different -- if the delegates had followed a different course - we had practiced a Doxology to sing. But, we reached the point where our "sacred worth" was weighed by the UMC against other priorities and was found to be without value.

Were we OK? Those of us who were arrested were NEVER isolated from our networks of support. Even as we were led away to the jail, past tearful UMC Bishops asking

forgiveness - we were constantly in community and immediately advocated for in a legal system that can easily be daunting. We were OK. The folks I worry about are those LGBT persons across the country who are having UMC-GC decisions interpreted for them by the secular press and [sometimes extremely biased] media - or were simply being bombarded with GC legislative decisions with no supportive community.

Where do we go from here?

Well, I'm sure not going to leave the UMC. I may get angry at the UMC, but no pompous right-wing sycophant of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, Good News, or Confessing Movement is going to "invite" me to leave the UMC! GC took away any doubts about the absolute necessity for congregations to be explicit about welcoming LGBT persons through networks like the Reconciling Congregation Program. And GC proved that each person CAN make a difference. The tree planted by the water "does not cease to bear fruits."

Tell your story. Each story of faith is a treasure to share. Mark, an openly Gay UM, who, with his partner is very active in a northern Virginia UMC, sent me a copy of his "story" which he shared with delegates. What Mark wrote was a simply eloquent Christian witness that spoke to his direct experience of God's grace on his life as a Gay man. He wasn't begging for a place at the table. He was offering the richness of his experience - a life grounded in faith and celebrating God's gift of sexuality, as evidence that the UMC has taken a wrong turn. "I do these things [church involvement] because the Gospel of Jesus is alive within my heart and calls me to serve Him and the poor and suffering. God didn't impose any barriers or require that I pass a sexuality test to serve as a Christian disciple. No, it is the church establishment that continues to mount these barriers."

Yes, there is difficult, necessary, political work to do - but we need to strengthen ourselves for the desert places because there is a whole lot of life to live before GC 2004 in Pittsburgh. The Bible offers us those healing waters for our dry spirits. One of the strongest testimonies drinking deep on the scriptures is how many LGBT persons find the first step in their political witness to the UMC after investing themselves in an intensive study - like Disciple Bible. It makes them ready so when anyone tries to use the Bible as a weapon they can say, "NO! That's not God's message to me - I know that and I don't need to prove it to YOU!"

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord...
They shall be like a tree planted by water...

Chip Alridge

Go Therefore and Get Elected!

Many have reflected on the impact of the 2000 General Conference [GC]. Some say they were energized by the numbers of people, including bishops and others, who were willing to stand, be arrested and witness against the injustice of the church. Others are less optimistic since this is the first time in twenty-five years that the percentage of votes in favor of LGBT rights in the church has fallen, rather than increased. Some feel that the arrests at GC represent a new level of commitment to justice, others feel it is a new low point which subverts any hope of working within the church, rather than simply undermining it.

One point of analysis that is usually missing is the larger picture. The UMC has a track record of resisting unjust United States policies in Nicaragua, South Africa, Guatemala, and other countries. Within the U.S. we have challenged unjust boarder policies through the Sanctuary Movement and shone light on environmental policies and practices which are destructive and deeply racist. Although this just skims the surface of the challenges this denomination has made to U.S. policies, it is enough to show why this government views the church as a threat.

Thus, for the last twenty-five years another movement has been growing - that of the Christian right-wing which is entwined with government officials from the top down and the bottom up. Former President Ronald Reagan initiated a "public relations" office to deal with criticism from the churches regarding policies in Nicaragua. Christian right stealth candidates have taken over school boards and won legislative seats to undermine the separation between church and state. "Ex" CIA operative, Mark Tooley, is a point-person for the *Good News Magazine* and its web of organizations.

Within the Church, the apparent goals of this movement have been to immobilize and eventually control progressive denominations. Whatever issue raised in the church -- abortion, homosexuality, Sophia, etc. - it is used to bring division and subvert confidence in the larger church. The eight-year process of determining the location of the General Board of Global Ministries did not end in a transfer [as it did among the Lutherans and the Presbyterians] but it occupied vast amounts of time, money and attention which could have been used for issues of justice. These have been effective strategies for immobilization.

Now, we are seeing additional steps aimed at controlling the denomination. Two decisions from GC not only do not bode well for LGBT persons, but they do not bode well for the entire church. One was the decision to determine the number of delegates to GC by the number of members rather than the number of clergy. This shifts the number of delegates to the Southeast Jurisdiction and to some locations in the South Central Jurisdiction. It significantly decreases delegates from the Western Jurisdiction. The

other decision was the election of Judicial Council members. They are overwhelmingly from the right-wing of our denomination. Other signs are increasing control of the University Council and the UM Men [the latter came out in support of the Boy Scouts' anti-gay stand].

I am not optimistic, but I am determined to organize where I can. If UMC members do not want to be making "headship of men" statements in the next generation, then we had better get our political act together. Electing delegates to GC, and getting speeches made once you get a delegate there, requires a rejection of the unwritten rule that "it's not nice - or Christian - to organize and strategize." If progressive Christians of all stripes in the church do not get moving, we can kiss the church good-bye.

Unfortunately, LGBT persons and issues are being used by the right to manipulate the total church. While all attention was on our concerns, these other power plays went down without a bump in the night. Now that the voting power has shifted, we will probably see much more of the right wing legislative agenda for the church at the next GC. At that time, LGBT issues may be pretty well a foregone conclusion. Groups like the General Commission on Religion and Race and the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women - and perhaps even the General Commission on Unity and Interreligious Concerns [GCUIC] will likely be voted out of existence. GCUIC has been a strong advocate for dialogue on LGBT concerns.

How should Affirmation members respond to all this?

1. Members should be actively engaged in promoting visibility for progressive [or even moderate] Christians in their conference. Perhaps develop two delegate lists: one progressive and the other moderate - plan on getting some of the first elected and then fill in with the second list. Organize them to consciously play off each other in debates so the conservatives lose air-time and visibility. Develop this list NOW, don't wait until it's time to elect delegates. By that time it's too late - trust me, the other side has their list at this moment.

2. Broaden your issue field. LGBT concerns may not pass this next time around but recognize that building allies is important for the long-run -- and your moral health.

3. Keep LGBT concerns on the table at the Conference level. Pass resolutions that fall within the "children of God" and "civil rights" clauses, but be cautious and strategic about crossing the other lines.

4. GET YOURSELF ELECTED to conference committees and tasks. Get visible NOW and get elected to GC in 2004!

- Clara Puntavista

Views

The official views of Affirmation are stated by the Co-Spokespersons. Opinions offered in signed columns, letters and articles are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Affirmation. We welcome those with opposing views to write.

Many thanks for the amount of time and effort that Affirmation members gave at General Conference [GC]. The late nights spent producing Affirm and the long days spent in witness and legislation work were important and appreciated.

In what, at times, felt like "Good Friday" mourning during the end of GC, we are reminded that "Easter Hope" is indeed coming for our Church. We may not know yet what this Eastertime will look like, but we do know that we need the efforts of all of our groups to reach that hope.

Blessings!

The RCP Staff

As we listened to National Public Radio announcers this morning discussing the continuing NAACP boycott of SC, my husband and I decided to turn this tactic on its head. We plan to vacation in Vermont this year and write to Vermont's governor and Department of Tourism telling them why--because we choose to spend our money in a state that has demonstrated its commitment to justice for same-sex couples. If anyone out there hasn't yet made this year's vacation plans, maybe you'd like to consider a similar move.

Thanks for the Affirmation News.

Sherry Wright

Vermont Update

I am a member of the Affirmation Council. My partner and I live in Vermont, the home of the Civil Union law. We have decided to take advantage of this opportunity, and to have our relationship licensed. We are planning a ceremony of commitment on July 7. We are both excited about this, and most of our family members have agreed to come.

According to the law, this will give us all of the rights and responsibilities granted to married couples in Vermont law. They tell us that there are 300-plus places in Vermont law that reference marriage or spouse. So I couldn't begin to list what additional rights we will have. The ones everyone talks about are the right to visit one another in the hospital, to inherit property from each other when one of us dies. One other I am aware of is that if one partner has title to a house, adding another person to the title costs \$1,500.00, unless the other person is a spouse, then it is free [I have friends who had to pay the \$1,500.00 fee to add a partner's name to the title of the house that her partner had purchased before they were together].

What the law doesn't cover is anything that happens outside of Vermont, or benefits granted by the US government. If Vermont had chosen to include us in the marriage laws, other states would have to pass laws to exclude us - or we would be included. The laws that exclude us could have been challenged in court.

Therefore, things that are not covered include pension rights. For us, most of our pensions are housed outside of the state of Vermont, and therefore we will probably not be able to get each other named as spouse. Spouses get more benefits than beneficiaries. Also, since Social Security is federal, we don't get spousal social security benefits.

So there is still work to do - but Vermont has made an important first step.

Addendum. Now July 7 has come and gone. Janet and I are now officially united. We have a certificate from the State of Vermont. The ceremony was small, but nice. Some of our family members have been supportive from the beginning, but others had to come a long way. It was great to have them all together to celebrate US.

One of the clergy who officiated, and who pronounced us united, said with obvious pride, "As an agent of the church and a very willing agent of the state, I pronounce the holy and civil union of Deb and Janet" [They are not UMs].

I am surprised by one reaction I have had since. I find myself noticing other people's wedding rings, and thinking "I have one of those." I feel a sense of inclusion in society that I hadn't realized I was missing before. I think we get so used to being excluded, we don't even realize it. In Vermont, there are some people who are committed to having the Civil Union law repealed. I don't think that will happen, but the elections in November are very important. Keep us in your prayers.

Deb Robinson

Witness Our Welcome Conference

Largest Cross-Denominational Gathering of Christian Laity, Clergy, and Denominational Leaders Working for Full Inclusion of LGBT Persons in Church and Society Ever Held.

Over 1000 LGBT individuals and their families, friends and allies gathered to claim and proclaim their rightful place of full inclusion in church and society through the Welcoming Church Movement and the Witness Our Welcome Conference: God's Promise Is For You [WOW].

WOW was the largest-ever gathering of Christians strategizing and working together across denominational boundaries for full inclusion of LGBT individuals in church and society. The Welcoming Church Movement is a rapidly growing grassroots effort in churches throughout the United States and Canada to work for full inclusion of LGBT persons. Over 1000 churches have already declared themselves "Welcoming", and several more each week become part of this movement.

The Welcoming Church Movement was represented at the WOW conference by laity, clergy, denominational leaders,

faith-based LGBT organizations, authors, and theologians, from 8 countries and 27 faith traditions.

At the Banquet, over \$40,000 was raised in an effort to expand the Ecumenical Welcoming Church Movement for full inclusion of LGBT individuals and their families, friends, and allies in all our churches and in society.

People attended several workshops, worship services, and plenaries on a variety of topics by nationally renowned leaders. Mark Bowman, Coordinator of the WOW Conference declared, "This was truly a historic event that would have never taken place without the hundreds of volunteers, speakers, presenters and worship leaders who are called by their faith to work for a truly inclusive Christian Church. Despite exclusive policies proclaimed by several denominations this summer, we are proclaiming God's love for all people and we are renewing our commitment to work together for a fully inclusive church."

For additional information contact:
<<http://www.wow2k.org>>. ▽

Minutes of the General Membership Meeting May 7, 2000 - Cleveland, OH

Moderated by Morris Floyd.

- Feeling of Being Assimilated by RC's - Being the Voice of LGBT Persons in the UMC - political voice - and being very clear that our voice includes our straight friends.
- Structural Changes to our Organization: will be given to membership at a different time and different ways.
- Affirmation's relationship with Soulforce Planned Action this coming Wednesday: In April it was understood that AMAR organizations would "support" but not "sponsor". Then Thursday at a meeting it was presented differently as to what would happen in the demonstration.

Friday the AMAR group met with Mel White. Mel promised not to disrupt the vote on Wednesday, but would make no promises for Thursday and Friday's demonstrations. Affirmation Council met Thursday evening and decided we would support any Affirmation member participating, but that the name of Affirmation would not be attached to any of the Soulforce actions.

"Affirmation fully supports its members and individuals who, as an act of conscience, choose to join the Soulforce witness."

- Jeanne Knepper proposes that she and others start a food fast until a favorable vote or end of GC 2000 to say this is an injustice to have special language barring LGBT persons rights in the UMC.
- Election of a pool of nominees which the Council will use to fill specific vacancies.
- Local Chapters: Important to keep on mailing list and individual membership dues current.

Madison, WI, Chapter is active. Sacramento, CA, active. Walter Lockhart and Becky Sechrist for MN Chapter. NYC-NJ Chapter will be reactivated this fall. Boulder, CO, Ben Roe. Los Angeles, CA, Scott Imler.

- Affirmation's twenty-fifth anniversary is this year. Celebration planned. Info will be coming. ▽